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AUTHOR Geismar, Lori A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Adult participation at the Early Childhood Research Center (ECRC) of the State University of New York at Buffalo is described in this paper. Five different programs serving families with infants, toddlers, and children 3 and 4 years old are briefly described to illustrate the complexity of program coordination at ECRC. The roles of staff teaching, students, undergraduate researchers, community parents, other professionals, and adult participants are discussed in terms of four processes: selection of teaching staff, scheduling of participants, training/development benefits to participants, and formal and informal program evaluation/monitoring activities conducted by participants for program improvement. Appended diagrams illustrate contributions from adult participants and benefits to those who participate in the programs. (RH)

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Adult Participation in Campus-Based Early Childhood Research Centers: Staff, Students, Parents and Researchers.

Lori A. Geismar
Jill E. Gelormino
Lorraine M. Sheehan

Early Childhood Research Center
State University of New York at Buffalo

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The Early Childhood Research Center (ECRC)* is a campus-based university lab school serving families with infants, toddlers, three and four-year old children. The ECRC is affiliated with the Department of Elementary and Remedial Education, Faculty of Educational Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

The major purposes of the ECRC are three-fold. First, the Center is a program of quality early childhood education. The infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers are provided with an enriching environment designed to support and enhance their cognitive, language, physical and social-emotional development on a part-time basis. The philosophy of the program can be described as one of "guided self-discovery" where the children are encouraged to choose from many materials and activities and to interact freely with their peers and adults.

The second major purpose of the Center is to provide training and professional development opportunities for the staff, students and parents at the center. The staff members are all certified teachers pursuing doctoral and master's degrees in early childhood education and related fields. The experience provided through working at the Center and attending staff meetings, and of receiving ongoing feedback from the director and university faculty are the means by which the staff develops further skills in working with children and parents. Additionally, graduate and undergraduate students and parents who participate in the programs learn techniques of handling child behaviors and skills of interacting with infants and preschoolers' through direct participation in the program.

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A third, but equally important purpose of the ECRC is to encourage and conduct research studies and course projects. Faculty members from Educational Studies as well as from departments such as psychology, linguistics, communicative disorders, music, occupational therapy and nursing both conduct investigations and develop course requirements that help students and professionals in their fields to better understand and serve young children.

Population of children at the Center come from both university and community families who live in urban and suburban Buffalo. The majority of the families are of middle socio-economic status. It has been shown that the major reason that parents enroll their children in the ECRC program is to give them an enriching preschool experience. Those who need more extensive child care would have to make additional arrangements since the ECRC operates half day sessions only.

Through flexible scheduling, our two classrooms accomodate five different programs. The infant and toddler programs share a room so that the infants, ranging in age from 3 months to 18 months, attend on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The toddlers, ages 18 through 36 months, attend on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings.

The second classroom is shared by the three and four year old programs. Three year olds can attend either five, three or two mornings per week. The four year olds have the same option of days during the afternoons.

The fifth program was developed in response to our extremely long waiting list of children under three years of age. This program differs from the others in several ways. The Toddler-Family Program serves families with both infants and toddlers. The purpose of the program is to provide these children and their families an opportunity to use our facility in some way before enrollment

in the regular program. The most unique feature of the Toddler-Family Program, as opposed to other ECRC programs, is that the parents play the role of primary caregivers and teachers of their children. The parents have divided themselves into 3 teams of 3 or 4 adults and these rotate their participation days throughout the semester. The families have access to the Center one afternoon per week.

The above description of program purposes and the Center population provides an indication of the complexity of program coordination. Integrating the variety of program components, meeting program goals and effectively utilizing adults while providing a quality children's program requires a continually active process of organization.

Organizational Processes

The organization of adult participation within the program can be divided into 4 separate processes. The first two, selection and scheduling are given attention at the beginning of a participation period. The other two, training/development and evaluation/monitoring are on-going and they affect the program in a variety of ways.

Selection

Selection of the teaching staff is based on both budgetary considerations and teacher experience. The number of children enrolled and total fees collected is related to the number of graduate assistants hired. Assuming approximately 100 children attend the program, money will be available for seven 1/2 time staff members on stipends. In 1973 it was decided that the $16,000 teacher line would be given up in return for several graduate assistant lines. This move was necessary to meet the demand for the increased number of teachers needed while staying within budget constraints. At present, a team of 2 teachers conducts a given children's program. As mentioned, all staff members are certified teachers returning from the field to further their

education. Previous experience with young children and genuine interest in and commitment to the field of early childhood education must be demonstrated.

The undergraduate students who participate in the program do so as part of an upper-level course requirement in a major area related to early childhood education and development. Consequently, this population has demonstrated competence in their academic careers thus far. We feel that fourth and third year students profit more from the experience after exposure to related course work. Other than admission to an academic program, no other means are incorporated to screen incoming student participants. The majority have little to no previous direct experience with young children.

The selection of researchers is more complex. After a formal written request has been submitted, faculty and dissertation proposals are reviewed by a research committee and a human subjects review board. Research proposals must be ethical and methodologically sound. Additionally, there is a preference for observational research which does not jeopordize the children's well-being or remove them from the classroom for lengthy periods of time. If children are removed from the classroom, we limit each session to approximately 20 minutes, unless the procedure is of direct benefit to the child (i.e. training study). Methodological considerations are less complicated for individuals fulfilling course requirements, such as the collection of language samples, that are not pure research or are abbreviated feasibility studies. In all cases, parent general and/or specific consent is required for a child to be a subject in an investigation.

Parent selection, naturally, is directly related to a child's enrollment and attendance in the program. Families are selected on the basis of their position on the waiting list and the sex and age of their child. There also is an effort to enroll families who appear to be stable members of the university or community. This consideration is based on the possibility that a child may be involved in longitudinal research studies. It is hoped that

children and parents remain at the center for a full four year period. We also encourage the enrollment of siblings.

Scheduling

At the beginning of each semester, student participants meet as a group to be scheduled for one-half day sessions at the Center. Student preference of age group and limitations of personal schedule determine the placement into a particular time slot. We generally place at least two and no more than three students at each time. We try to fill slots in the infant and toddler programs first, where the need for extra adults is greatest.

The amount and scheduling of parent participation is determined by the particular needs and preferences of the child's teachers. As a rule, the minimum number of times required is once per semester for the 3 and 4 year old programs. In the infant and toddler programs, the teachers encourage monthly participation. Monthly calendars are posted in the classroom and the parents are expected to independently sign up for their days in advance. Parents often use this time as an opportunity to bring a snack or materials for an activity.

Scheduling of researchers usually occurs prior to the beginning of a semester so that studies can begin after the children's adjustment period. This period is approximately two weeks in length and is considered an important time for parents, teachers and children to learn about one another and to settle into the program. Observation room use by the parents is greatest during this time and researchers are encouraged to postpone their observations until all are more settled. One exception to this policy would be for researchers to use this time to develop reliability between observers. This practice, in our view is productive use of researcher's time. The other determination for the scheduling of researchers and students working on course projects would be the time and days of the week of the program in which they are interested in.

Of course, there is a minimal amount of flexibility involved, unless a student has the option of working with or observing more than one age group.

Benefits and Contributions

We would now like to focus on how the adults who have been selected and scheduled to work at the Center both gain from the experience and contribute to the overall functioning of the Center. The major benefit to the graduate students who serve as teachers at the ECRC involves an opportunity to work with young children in a model program directed by a leader in the field of early childhood education. The majority of the teacher's training experience occurs at staff meetings where theoretical and practical concerns are addressed. Discussions of philosophical and theoretical approaches of child development often lead to clarification of "why" we practice in the manner in which we do. In terms of practice, there are always the direct concerns of how to work more effectively with children, parents and students. Additionally, the director attempts to help teachers, through readings and discussions, develop a knowledge of administrative concerns. It is assumed that many of the center's teachers will return to the field in some administrative capacity. It should be noted that these meetings tend to be informal and relaxed and often run for 2 - 4 hours. Additionally, unscheduled lunchtime meetings occur where issues in early childhood education are discussed.

Teaching in a campus-based early childhood program requires continual efforts to maintain quality programming. While meeting the needs of the adult participants, it is the role of the teacher to ensure protection of the children. It is the teacher's responsibility to be aware of the adult interaction with the children and the potential consequences of such interaction.

Student involvement is an integral part of the ECRC. The Center serves three groups of students: students who participate in the classrooms, students who observe the youngsters, and students who are obtaining training in research methodologies and techniques. All are required to make a semester-long

commitment to the Children's Programs.

Some participating students are fulfilling requirements for undergraduate courses in either human services or psychology. The human service students participate once per week and attend a weekly seminar which is instructed by two of the teachers from the Center. The psychology students spend two days at the ECRC, participating once per week and observing the other day. They also attend a seminar led by a child-study specialist. All of the participating students are given the freedom to interact with the children and conduct mini lessons and projects. They are, of course, supervised and guided by the teachers in the classroom. The happenings of the day provide a basis for feedback and discussion among students and staff.

The students gain practical experience working with young children in a group setting, an opportunity to develop insights into the behavior and development of these youngsters and an opportunity to interact with the parents and teachers at the center.

These participating students are vital to the center's functioning. Their mere presence improves the adult child ratio in the classroom. Moreover, they provide for mediation of experiences while they interact with the children. Parents and teachers also tend to appreciate their enthusiasm, even though they are not "experts" in child development or education. Students are encouraged to share their talents and skills while participating in the classroom. In addition, participating students provide rough monitoring and screening of children's development.

Another group of students which benefit are those from graduate and undergraduate courses in departments such as psychology, education, architecture and design and linguistics who observe at the Center. Their observation of the children's interactions, behaviors and use of materials allows the students to

further their knowledge of their respective fields as it relates to young children. In return, these students provide the staff members with feedback of the programs and materials such as specifically designed toys. They also provide avenues for good public relations with community people and academicians.

The third group of students which the center serves are those students who are gaining experience and training as researchers. Many of these students are from the psychology or education departments. They are given the opportunity to observe, record and code behaviors. Other students are gaining skills in participant observation and other forms of qualitative data collection. In certain instances, administrators and staff members provide guidance in effectively interacting with children while eliciting responses. Once again, the Center benefits from the feedback that these participants can provide the staff.

The second major group of adult participants is the various type of researchers who conduct studies involving the Center's children, parents and staff. A major proportion of these researchers are graduate students, some of whom collect data for dissertation purposes. Others perform informal investigations which delve into areas such as infant-toddler play, cognitive development, language development, sex role sterotyping and caregiver-child interaction.

Faculty members from diverse disciplines conduct research investigations at the Center. The researcher is inclined to use the Center because of the expertise of the staff and appropriateness of the setting. The naturalistic environment provides an arena in which the researcher is able to integrate theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Furthermore, the researcher is exposed to the field of early childhood education, its members and students of the field.

Researchers are of great value to the Center. Through their investigations, the researchers provide feedback to the staff, while building a broader knowledge base for the field of early childhood education. They also provide a bridge between early childhood education, the Center and other academic fields. Moreover, through research publications the literature concerning young children and their programs is made available to professionals in a variety of fields.

Medical personnel, social service workers and educators throughout the Western New York area use the expertise and facilities of the ECRC. In the medical field, nurses, psychologists, dentists, pediatricians and neonatalogists seek knowledge about young children from an educational perspective. The Center also provides input for social service professionals concerned with child protective services, parent education programs and postnatal screening and follow-up procedures.

Educators in the field of early childhood education, elementary education and special education use staff personnel as consultants, trainers of teachers, lecturers, advisory board members and program evaluators to fulfill their various needs. Publications in professional journals of education, presentations at professional conferences and in-service workshops allow the administrators and teachers of the Center to transmit knowledge to these various sectors of the education field.

In return, the Center gains a liason with professions concerned with the health, education and overall development of young children. At times, these professionals will aid in evaluation and formal screening of the youngsters at the Center.

The Center also serves community organizations and agencies. Child care programs, parent groups, as well as community action groups use the Center's

resources. Information, in-service meetings, handbooks and pertinent literature are disseminated from the Center to the community. This community-center relationship allows us to keep abreast of current happenings while maintaining our position within the community. Furthermore, these community ties generate necessary and vital support for the ECRC.

The people who are in most direct and consistent contact with the Center, the director and the teachers are the parents. To begin with, parents receive a quality program for their children. They are also provided with educational guidance in their role as parent and as first and primary teacher of their children. More directly, parents receive training for their role as an active participant in the classroom. Each parent receives an ECRC Parent Handbook which facilitates his or her participation in the classroom.

The Center serves as a resource for the parents. They directly benefit through consultations with the teachers and director. Additionally, parents tend to better understand their children and better organize and enjoy their time with their children when enrolled in a center such as this (Cataldo & Salzer, 1982).

Parental input has a significant impact on the program. Parents act as resources to teachers by providing information about their children and what they perceive as their children's needs. This in turn is incorporated into determining some child goals for particular children. Parents enrich the daily program with their talents and skills. A mother or father's active participation in a classroom provides for increased adult-child interaction and valuable mediation of children's experiences. Researchers have cited persistent gains in children's social and cognitive development as a result of parent involvement in early childhood programs. (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Goodson & Hess, 1978). In her book, Infant and Toddler Programs: A Guide to Very Early Childhood Education, Christine Cataldo (1983) articulates the point

that these benefits of parental involvement coincide with the continuous need for the efficient utilization of parents in early childhood programs.

Evaluation of Adult Participation

The ECRC as described above with its many components and adult participants has the responsibility of attending to the important process of Center evaluation. The formal means of evaluation include the director's annual report and a periodic evaluation committee report focusing on Center research. In addition, adult participants contribute to the program by providing more informal feedback to help monitor and evaluate program functioning. There are specific types of input which we actively seek from each group of adult participants.

The teaching staff is directly responsible for formal and informal evaluation of individual program goals. In terms of program functioning, the staff is expected to communicate needs and strengths to the director. This type of input is considered crucial to ongoing program improvement.

The written observations and comments provided by the students concerning the children and the environment help the staff see their programs better. Additionally, through interaction with the students, the staff learns the most effective means of gaining from student involvement and the skills necessary for student supervision.

Every research investigation conducted at the Center provides another opportunity to assess how effectively we are meeting the needs of researchers. Through researcher feedback we are able to discover ways to improve our facilities and procedures for use by researchers. In some cases, research results can be used by staff in program planning and interaction with children.

Parents, of course, contribute to program development. Their suggestions are always welcomed and considered. If there is an opportunity to involve parents in policy decisions we consult with them. We acknowledge the fact that the above mentioned adult participation is a necessary component of the

ECRC as a university-based children's program. Therefore, we need to continuously evaluate our provisions for and benefits derived from adult participation.

Conclusion

When examining the literature, it becomes clear that despite the fact that the majority of child development research takes place at campus centers, few authors have addressed the existence of these centers and the processes involved in sustaining them. We feel that a systematic description and evaluation of these centers is necessary to further delineate their role in early childhood education. Furthermore, in light of the current financial difficulties experienced by institutions of higher education, the value and powerful contributions which this type of center provides to many facets of the university and community must be articulated loudly and clearly as a defense against budgetary cuts.

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Figure 1: Contributions from Adult Participants

Lori A. Geismar, Jill E. Gelormino & Lorraine M. Sheehan
Early Childhood Research Center, SUNY at Buffalo

Figure 2: Benefits to Adult Participants
Lori A. Geismar, Jill E. Gelormino & Lorraine M. Sheehan
Early Childhood Research Center SUNY at Buffalo